

Focus...Energy Conservation

Study Focuses on Reaching Refuges Without a Car

By Nathan Caldwell

In a perfect world, a national wildlife refuge visitor would not only enjoy the natural respite that such a haven offers but would do so in an environmentally friendly way. He or she could leave the car at home and ride a bike to a bog, a trolley to a marsh, a subway to view an eagle nest or a bus to a fishing hole.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Volpe National Transportation Systems Center are studying the feasibility of just that.

The study, funded by the Federal Transit Administration's Paul S. Sarbanes Transit in the Parks program, is identifying refuges that visitors can access via alternative transportation, particularly public transit and major regional bicycle and recreation trails. The study has examined 138 refuges so far.

Beyond environmental benefits, transit and trail connections enable individuals without motor vehicles to have access to refuges.

So far, the study has found that 62 refuges have some type of transit service; 41 refuges have no transit service within 15 miles; and 35 refuges have no or limited public access or did not have information on transit connections. The study also preliminarily found that 12 refuges had two or more bicycle or recreation trail connections; 23 refuges had one trail connection; and 103 refuges had none.

The study ranks each refuge based on: distance to an urban area; distance to nearest regional bicycle or recreation trail; distance to nearest transit stop; trail quality, based on trail length, service, connections to urban areas and regional destinations; and transit quality, based on frequency of service and ease of connection to population centers.

Based on the 138 refuges, the study preliminarily identified these as having

strong transit connections or high potential for new connections: Minnesota Valley Refuge near Minneapolis; Sweetwater Marsh and Tijuana Slough Refuges near San Diego; John Heinz Refuge at Tinicum near Philadelphia; Tualatin River Refuge near Portland, OR; Two Ponds Refuge near Denver; Occoquan Bay Refuge, VA, outside Washington, DC; Steigerwald Lake Refuge near Vancouver, WA; Wertheim Refuge on Long Island, NY; and Wallkill River Refuge in New Jersey.

The study preliminarily identified these as having strong bicycle or recreation trail connections or high potential for new connections: Minnesota Valley Refuge; Big Muddy Refuge near Columbia, MO; Upper Mississippi Refuge (Savanna, IL, district); Sweetwater Marsh Refuge; Don Edwards San Francisco Bay Refuge; Assabet River Refuge outside Boston; Upper Mississippi Refuge (LaCrosse, WI, district); and Big Branch Marsh Refuge near New Orleans. Just two refuges – Minnesota Valley and Sweetwater Marsh – are on both lists.


As a next step, the study's research team is interviewing Refuge System regional roads coordinators to identify more refuges with existing or potential transit and trail connections. The study will use those findings to focus Service marketing and outreach efforts and to seek Federal Highway Administration and Federal Transit Administration assistance to take advantage of such transit and trail connections.



Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, UT, has designated parking for everybody – including bicyclists. (USFWS)

The Sarbanes Transit in Parks Program recently completed a study to help facilitate bus service to a planned new visitor center at Rocky Mountain Arsenal Refuge, CO, which is surrounded by a trail system. The program also is funding projects to improve nonmotorized access to National Elk Refuge, WY, and Chincoteague Refuge, VA.

Five other refuges received funds, directly or indirectly, from the program this year: Neal Smith Refuge, IA, for preliminary work on a bike/pedestrian trail; Parker River Refuge, MA, for a shuttle to a commuter rail station; Wichita Mountains Refuge, OK, to replace a tour bus; Presquile Refuge, VA, to plan the replacement of a cable ferry; J.N. "Ding" Darling Refuge, FL, for a transportation analysis on Sanibel Island.

For more information about the program and how to apply for fiscal year 2011 funding, go to http://www.fta.dot.gov/funding/grants/grants_financing_6106.html and sign up for e-mail updates. 

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